

Book Reviews

Born in the Country: A History of Rural America, by David B. Danbom. Revisiting Rural America Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xii, 306 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$42.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY CARROLL VAN WEST, MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

Born in the Country is an excellent study of the significance of agriculture and rural life in American history. David B. Danbom, a North Dakota State University history professor whose expertise lies in early twentieth-century Great Plains agricultural history, has prepared a balanced, well-written account designed to introduce rural history to college students and to provide scholars with a synthesis of recent agricultural history set in a social and political context.

Danbom covers a broad chronological period, beginning in the first chapter with sketches of Native American agriculture before contact and comparing those traditions with the rural life found in English and European villages at the time of colonization. In the next four chapters he traces agricultural patterns from the early English colonies to the late antebellum era. Danbom concludes that "if there was ever an age of the farmer in the United States, the period between the conclusion of the Revolution and the onset of the Civil War was it" (65). He reviews such broad trends as the maturation of the colonial socioeconomic infrastructure and the beginnings of market consciousness and behavior among antebellum farmers. "Neighborliness" (91), a key to rural culture, came to define social relations among farm families.

According to Danbom, the Civil War's impact on the American farmer was "immense" — nowhere more so than in the "unmaking and remaking of the rural South" (109) that took place from 1860 to 1870. He considers the war's impact on the rural North, but includes no separate section on the rural Midwest or Far West. The late nineteenth century is discussed in chapter 7, which is the author's first full exploration of the impact of industrialization and market capitalism on American agriculture. What Danbom calls the three M's — "market, middlemen, and money" (134) — provided the dynamics for profound socioeconomic change in this era.

Seven chapters and 160 pages of Danbom's 270-page synthesis cover the first three hundred years of American rural history, leaving five chapters and 110 pages for the last one hundred years. This alloca-

tion of space reflects the author's own research interests as well as his conviction that farmers and farming still matter to modern America.

Danbom's weaving of agricultural history into a political context is best achieved in chapters on the Progressive Era and the New Deal. The "golden age" (162) of American agriculture (1900 to 1920) was also the time of the Country Life Movement, when urban progressives and other reformers became interested in rural uplift, a program of change that also represented "the diminished status and growing peripheralization of rural America" (175). Despite their declining numbers, farmers won several legislative battles, including passage of the Smith-Lever Act (1914), Smith-Hughes Act (1917), Capper-Volstead Act (1922), and Agricultural Marketing Act (1929). Yet the economic devastation that befell the rest of the country during the Great Depression of the 1930s had already scarred parts of rural America, including the northern plains, since the early 1920s. For survival, farmers grudgingly accepted federal intervention in the marketplace and in the operation of their own farms. The success of the New Deal, however, was mixed. Benefits, in general, "flowed disproportionately to large-scale commodity producers" (229), exacerbating a trend that has defined American agriculture in the second half of the twentieth century.

Danbom's final two chapters analyze the rise of agribusiness since World War II. Investments in machines and chemicals, along with improved breeds of crops and livestock, led to a production revolution. American farmers, at the same time as their numbers were rapidly shrinking, finally became the progressive, educated, rational business people that the reformers had always desired. The rise of the progressive farmer has not solved the challenges of modern agriculture, especially the issue of agricultural sustainability. With the heavy demands of capital, doubts about both the environmental and financial cost of chemicals, and questions about the ethics of further genetic manipulation of animals, the future of resource-intensive agriculture is uncertain. As midwesterners know, the fate of the family farmer, after the debt crisis of the 1980s, is even more problematic.

Throughout the text, Danbom notes the significant contributions to American agriculture made by such Iowans as Seaman Knapp (extension service), Gilbert A. Haugen (pro-farming tariffs), Henry A. Wallace Jr. (hybrid corn), and the Farmers Holiday movement of 1932. The Midwest is adequately discussed, especially in the chapters on the twentieth century.

Danbom's skillful narrative, however, is more about farming than farmers. He aims to place older social and political studies within the context of the "new rural history"; indeed, he claims that the book "is mainly a study of farm people in America" (xi). But with its emphasis

on changing agricultural practices, crops, government policies, and agricultural agencies, the text is more focused on the agriculture produced by rural people than the people themselves. In this sense, *Born in America* is an excellent introduction to the new agricultural history, a broad spectrum of scholarship that has so informed our understanding of rural America.

Another limitation is Danbom's Turnerian approach. The first chapter discusses Native American agricultural practices and identifies key European rural traditions, but from that point on, once the first settlers arrive in the Chesapeake, these themes fall out of the narrative. Later mentions of plains tribes, for instance, treat them as obstacles to settlement; their acculturation, either by force or choice, to an agricultural way of life is a missing, yet important, story. Puzzling, too, is the omission of how the waves of largely eastern European immigration affected agriculture, especially in the Great Plains. Little is said about the Southwest, or the old Spanish frontier, save for Texas Populists. Rural traditions tied to Spanish culture are missing, too. Considering their importance to modern American agriculture, neither California nor Florida receive adequate attention. Little coverage is given to irrigation or migrant labor.

These omissions do not overshadow the value of *Born in America* as a synthesis of a generation of scholarship. Rural historians at the state, regional, and national levels owe David Danbom much for conceptualizing their field of study for a new generation of historians.

Legacy of the Land: Agriculture's Story to the Present, by Hiram M. Drache. Danville, IL: Interstate Publishers, 1996. xxv, 494 pp. Illustrations, tables, references, index. \$17.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY MARK FRIEDBERGER, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Hiram Drache's *Legacy of the Land* is the third survey of agricultural history to have appeared in as many years. This relative abundance contrasts to a dearth a few years ago when the economist Thomas Cochrane's *The Development of American Agriculture* was the only text in print. Drache is an agricultural insider, in that while he taught history, he also farmed. This background is reflected not only in this book, but also in his previous work. Drache is a rarity today among academic historians because he is an unabashed enthusiast and booster for industrialized agriculture.

Arguably there are two ways to approach textbook writing. The first is to write a brief interpretive essay that makes up for its lack of comprehensiveness with an intriguing thesis and fresh insights. This

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